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# Mental Noise

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# MENTAL

# NOISE

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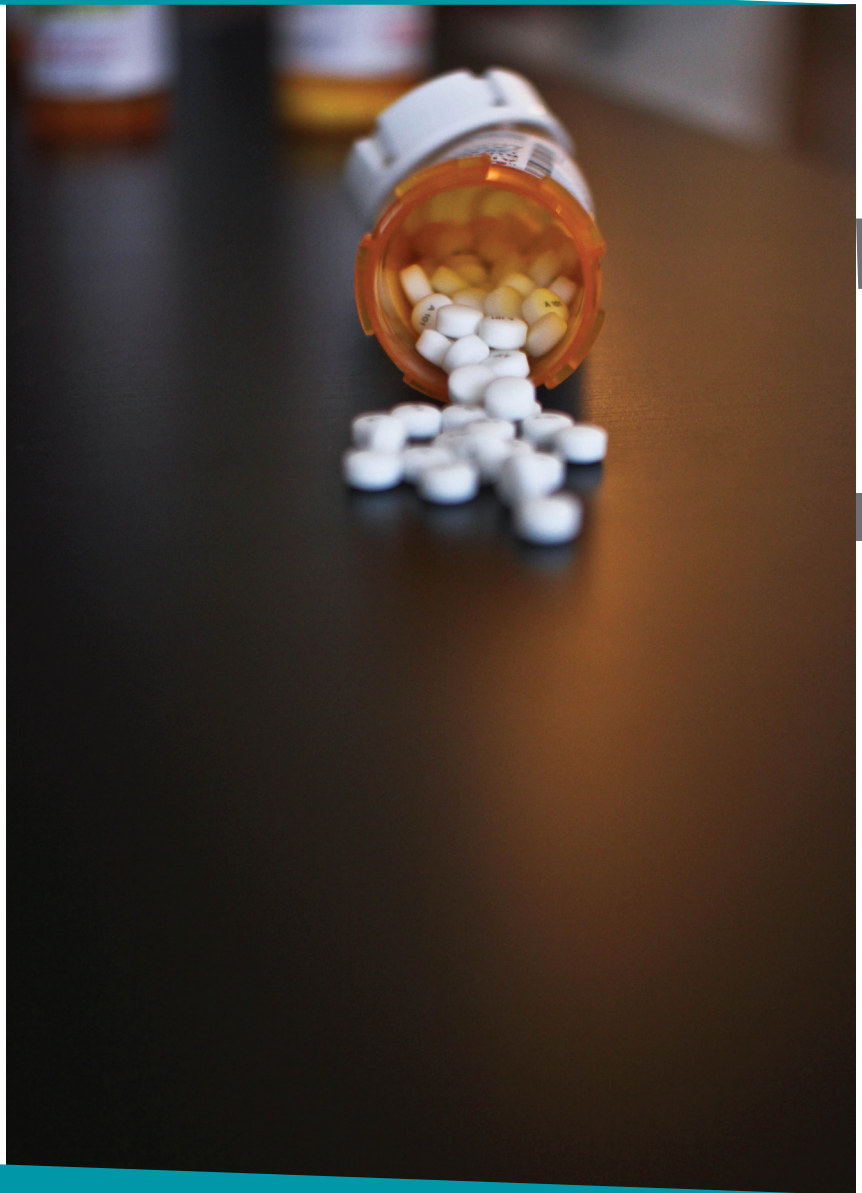
College can be a big change from the high school routine, and students deal with stress every day. But at what point do the stresses of school and life become more than just daily struggles?

Every day, Heather Rennerfeldt would open her books to study. She would read a few lines, and instantly the panic would set in. Her heart would race and the sweating couldn't be stopped, either. The only thing Heather could do to end it was shut her book and walk away. But it didn't stop there. She looked like any other college student, and around her friends she would act like it, too, but this did no justice to the internal war going on in her head.

Last fall, Heather, junior in chemical engineering, was diagnosed with severe anxiety and panic attacks. Panic attacks weren't the only side effect of Heather's anxiety. She also dealt with depersonalization, a psychological symptom involving a feeling of detachment from one's body or mind. These episodes would usually occur after a panic attack and could last up to a week. Heather describes the experience as feeling outside of herself and not being able to be get in touch with reality.

"I thought I was going crazy. I had no idea what was going on. I thought I was going to start developing schizophrenia. I was just really scared that I was going to develop some terrible mental disorder and never be normal again," Heather says.

What Heather didn't know was that she was by no means alone. In fact, according to Director of Student Disability Services Steven Moats, 800 students at Iowa State have documented disabilities, of which almost 80 percent are mental illnesses or disorders.







**“I CAN SIT AND READ SOMETHING FIFTY-ZILLION TIMES AND IT WILL NEVER SWITCH OVER TO LONG-TERM MEMORY.”**



The test is in session, and within the first 20 minutes, a student stands up and starts a pile on the podium at the front of the room. Brian Bendickson is still working on his test in the middle of the room. The hot sweats set in and his mind goes blank. He can't remember any of the information he spent hours studying and begins to play “connect the dots” with his Scantron. Panicked thoughts start running through his head: “Oh no, I'm going to be the last one here. I have to go. I have to get out of here.” He begins moving filled-in bubbles around on the Scantron, erasing answers he knew were right just because they looked like they were in the wrong spot. This is a typical testing experience for Brian, senior in hospitality management, before he was diagnosed with memory disconnect, ADHD and test anxiety last fall. Brian knew he was different the day his third grade class started using flashcards. Because of Brian's memory disconnect, he can't transition short-term memory into long-term memory, so the use of flashcards or simply reading over notes doesn't help him. “I can sit and read something fifty-zillion times and it will never switch over to long-term memory.”

Beyond school, Brian's memory disconnect also affects him socially, such as when trying to connect a name with a face. “I have that problem a lot where I go, ‘I know that person but I don't remember their name.’ ... I had to set up a group with a girl whose name I couldn't remember, I had to text my friend Natalie and ask her what the girl's name was. It's not that big of a hassle though, sometimes it's very comical,” he says.

Each day when the sun would rise, Alison Metzger felt no desire to get out of bed. In her mind, there was no point. She had no motivation to go to class, and she didn't want to talk to people. Just the idea of having to converse with another person gave her so much anxiety. It was easier, safer even, to stay in bed.

This is a common response found in people who are diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety. Alison, junior in business, received this diagnosis last February. Although Alison is genetically predisposed to depression, a bad relationship, her struggles with school and unhappiness in her previous major, chemical engineering, pushed her into her depression. “I've always been a perfectionist, so this idea of failure really did not go well with me ... While some people can easily get over stuff like that, someone like me who has issues — it all piles on and makes it worse,” Alison says.



# SEEKING HELP

On the first day of every class of each semester, you are handed a syllabus. Somewhere on that syllabus it says that if you need to make disability accommodations, you should contact the professor. This is where Student Disability Resources comes into play. Student Disability Resources is a service offered on campus for students going through scenarios like Heather's, Brian's and Alison's. Their offices are located in the Student Services building, and they are there to help students with all disabilities, mental or physical, and to make arrangements with students' professors to make classroom life possible.

"We are fortunate at Iowa State to have lots and lots of really good professors and instructors that are student-centered and have all students succeed, so they are willing to work with students when there are challenges," Moats says. Heather only utilized Student Disability Resources when she was at "the lowest of lows."

She showed up to the office for the first time shortly after her panic attacks had begun and she had an upcoming test in a chemical engineering class. In order to get full accommodations, you must file your diagnosis with the office, but the office was able to work with her professor to allow her to take the class in a separate room as a temporary accommodation.

"After that I never went back to Student Disability Resources. I didn't want to have special accommodations ... whenever this was happening I didn't want to talk about it because I would freak myself out into a panic attack," Heather says.

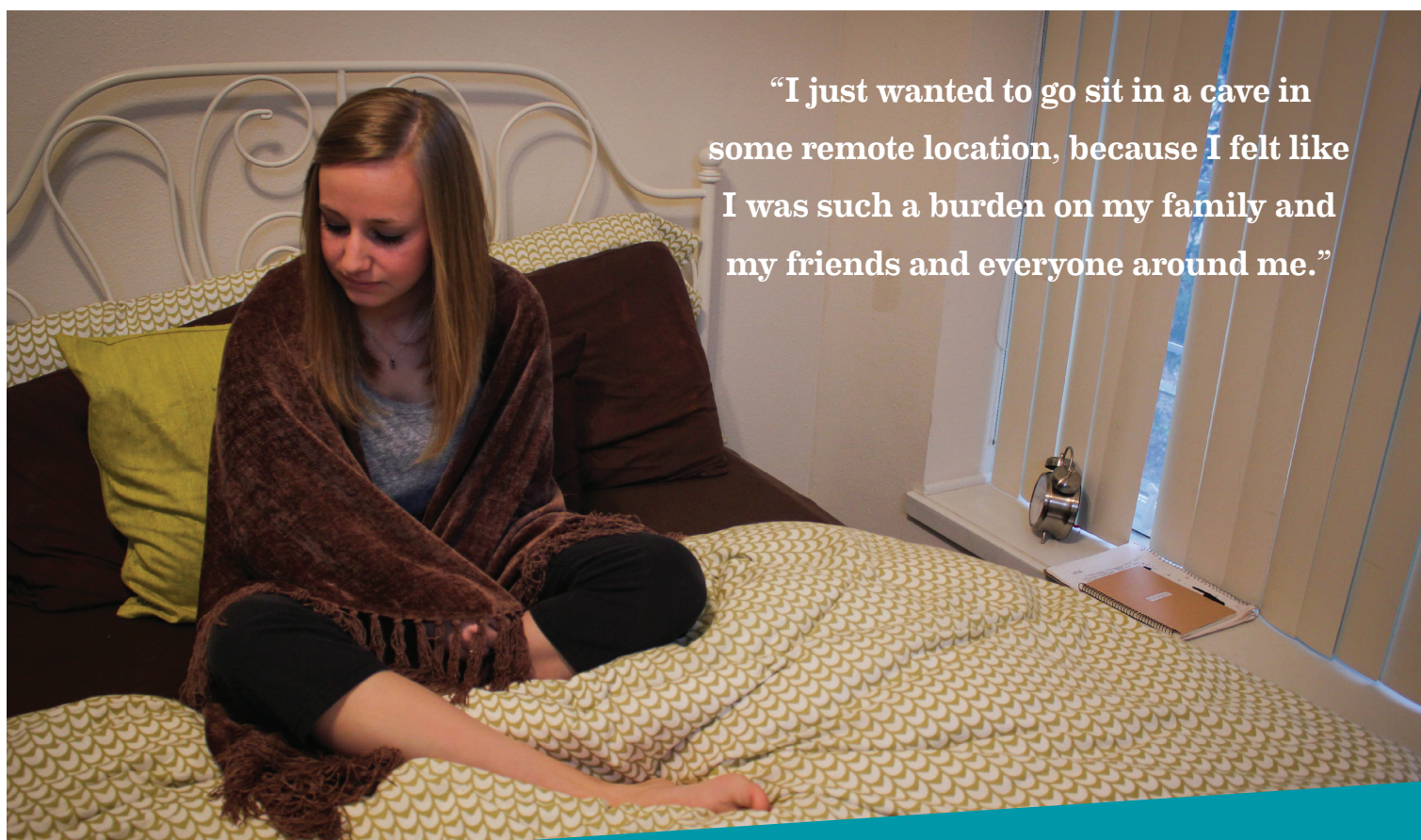
After almost failing a semester of school, Brian realized he needed to find help. He reached out to Student Disability Resources and they were able to get him the tests he needed to receive his diagnosis. Now that his diagnosis is on file, Brian is able to go in each semester and make accommodations in each class by simply filling out a form. His accommodations include taking all of his classes in a separate room and using a special pen that records audio as he takes notes.

"Most of the teachers are very accommodating. They don't treat me any differently. Most of the time they don't realize you are using things like my pen," Brian says. Alison remembers the day she hit rock bottom like it was yesterday. "I never had thoughts of killing myself, but all I wanted to do was run away by myself. I just wanted to go sit in a cave in some remote location, because I felt like I was such a burden on my family and my friends and everyone around me."

For Alison, admitting she had a problem and reaching out for help was not only the most important step to getting better, it was also the hardest one.

"There is a stigma about depression and anxiety, and that was one of my biggest things. It wasn't just that I was having this disorder but I was incredibly ashamed of having that disorder. I didn't want to be one of those students that had to have help," Alison says.

Once she was able to admit her feelings and talk about them openly with her family, Alison was able to get the help she needed. After seeing a psychiatrist and receiving her diagnosis, she filed it with Student Disability Resources.



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## RAISING AWARENESS

They were able to help her withdraw from school for the semester so she could take the time to get better and not have the grades from her classes on her record.

Heather, Brian and Alison are just three of the 800 Iowa State students who have documented disabilities. They're also part of the 80 percent of that number who struggle with mental disorders. Moats says the organization sees at least one student each day who has never been diagnosed, and research shows that up to 20 percent of the general population has or will have a disability.

“Most of the disabilities that we see are what I call ‘invisible disabilities,’ Moats says. “Those would be the ones that you can’t see with the naked eye, but includes mental illness, depression, high anxiety and others.”

As Heather tried to figure out what was going on in her head, she felt alone. She recalls thinking that she was the only one and she was

“going to have to go to the loony bin.” If she had known about other students with mental conditions, Heather says she may have reached out for help more often and sooner.

“What I needed was comfort and reassurance to know I was going to be okay ... I was desperate. I wanted to know what was going on with me,” Heather says.

In Brian's case, raising awareness for learning disabilities at a young age not only would have helped him, but also his parents, teachers and peers. As a child, Brian dealt with other children labeling him because he was in special classes. They just assumed he was different without ever understanding what was actually happening. Brian's mom didn't even understand, and as she tried to help him with his homework, she would get frustrated. There were times when she would yell at him for not doing things right, until she finally realized something was wrong.

“There is a lack of testing in schools K-12 that I think needs to be taken care of. I'm sure there are a lot of people who have disabilities and don't know it and have just adjusted through their life,” Brian says.

Until she went to Student Disability Resources, Alison says she also felt “completely alone in this.” Knowledge that her condition is actually fairly common among college students is what Alison says helped her the most.

“I think that there could be more awareness of this ... I would consider depression and anxiety just as much as an illness as meningitis or mono. I think we spread the word about catching diseases, but I think there should also be something for telling students that anxiety and depression is common and ‘these are the steps you can do to avoid it’ or ‘these are the people you can talk to’ or just tell them they are not alone in this,” Alison says.

If you feel like you are experiencing symptoms similar to Heather, Brian or Alison or are struggling with a mental battle that gets in the way of your school work, Student Disability Resources may be able to help. Their offices are located in 1076 of the Student Services Building. You may also call 515-294-7220 or email [disabilityresources@iastate.edu](mailto:disabilityresources@iastate.edu) with questions.